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SUBJECT: SINIORA SWEET ON CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS,
SOUR ON GHAJAR

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison, for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Flush with March 14's victory in parliament's election of Constitutional Council members on December 18, PM Siniora and aide Rola Nouredine met with visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) David Hale, Ambassador, and NEA Lebanon Desk Officer Matthew Irwin on December 19. Siniora bristled at new Israeli conditions for withdrawal from northern Ghajar, but emphasized he would continue indirect discussions via the UN. While generally positive on Russia's offer to donate MiG-29s to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Siniora noted that LAF leadership and the cabinet would "wait to see the details."

MAJORITY STARTS TO ACT LIKE ONE

2. (C) In a mild rant, PM Siniora called the post-Doha unity government "unsustainable," decrying opposition threats to block March 14's candidates for Lebanon's Constitutional Council, duly elected on December 18 by parliamentary majority but subject to cabinet review and possible opposition veto. "We can compromise on many things, but sometimes people will be unhappy." Siniora said he hoped the situation would improve after the elections; DAS Hale expressed skepticism that elections would resolve the fundamental differences between March 14 and March 8 or Hizballah's ability to resort to veto-by-force, but suggested March 14 could preserve gains made since 2005. "And add to them," Siniora interjected, clearly pleased that March 14 had begun to flex its parliamentary muscle. "Yesterday we learned what can be done when we take a strong, united position."

GHAJAR

3. (C) Summarizing his recent meetings in Israel, DAS Hale told Siniora that "it's clear Israel is looking for a way out of Ghajar" and understands the need to help Lebanese moderates in advance of the 2009 parliamentary elections.

"Ghajar won't just help March 14," replied Siniora, "it will send a message that we can accomplish something with Israel through non-violent means." Both noted their high hopes for UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams' upcoming visit to Israel. PM's aide Rola Nouredine said she was pleased with Williams' work on Lebanon and Israel's appointment of MFA Director General Aaron Abramovich as lead negotiator for Ghajar. "He's creative. He's the one who pushed new ideas to FM Livni about possible reciprocal arrangements with Lebanon, including the idea of a renewed armistice."

14. (C) DAS Hale told Siniora that the Israelis had laid out three conditions for withdrawal from Ghajar. First, they want international acknowledgment, probably via the UN, that they've returned to their pre-2006 compliance with the 2000 line of withdrawal (the blue line). Second, they want Lebanon to agree to consultations prior to any "change in the security situation in northern Ghajar." Third, they want some form of acknowledgment from Lebanon that northern Ghajar was resolved diplomatically, perhaps enshrined in a UN-drafted document and signed by the parties.

15. (C) Responding to the first condition, Siniora said, "I will not censor international reaction to Israel's withdrawal. The UN Security Council is free to comment." On the second condition, Siniora said the idea of consultations had been "raised and rejected." He reiterated his commitment to indirect discussions via UNIFIL, but said he would not seek Israel approval to exercise sovereignty over Lebanese land. Bristling at the third condition, he said, "Neither I

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nor any Lebanese leader can sign such a document."

16. (C) Similarly frustrated, Nouredine added that Israel had once again changed its demands. "First they wanted a security framework, then negotiations at the political level, and now they want a document. We've signed and delivered our agreement to the UNIFIL plan, which clearly shows this has been resolved through negotiations." "I'm beginning to think this is more than political intransigence," added Siniora, "but that perhaps vested Israeli interests are at stake, wrapped up in corruption or smuggling. The previous condition, to which we agreed, was that withdrawal not be portrayed as a victory for Hizballah. But the status quo is a victory for Hizballah. The Israelis are getting too greedy, and they might end up with nothing. I'd rather this continue for one hundred years than give more concessions."

PREPARING FOR TRANSITIONS

17. (C) Siniora said he did not expect the new Administration "to bring us from the night into the day," but that its anticipated focus on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would be good for the region and regional perceptions of the United States. Musing on the impact of President-elect Obama's election, Siniora added, "It's clear that America is looking to purge years of intolerance. Similarly, Arabs look at Lebanon as a place where the values of freedom, tolerance, and humility are respected, or where we can return to their being respected. That's one more reason for the new administration to stick with Lebanon."

18. (C) Hale urged Siniora to ensure that the Lebanese developed their own strategy to achieve their goals, rather than waiting for the international community to provide one. Siniora noted that "March 14 has a plan," but that the coalition would need to remain united for it to succeed. "In Lebanon, we have micro-aspirations and macro-consequences. For example, this Kataeb-Lebanese Forces bickering (referring to the debate between Kataeb head Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea's over which March 14 candidates would run in disputed Christian electoral districts) is stupid. We need to forget about individual seats, about

little victories, and do whatever it takes to win."

MIFFED ABOUT MIGS

¶9. (C) DAS Hale outlined U.S. concerns with Defense Minister Murr's televised acceptance of Russia's offer to donate 10 MiG-29 fighter jets to the LAF, saying the United States would say nothing negative in public, but was privately dismayed. First, Murr had jeopardized his good relations with Pentagon and CENTCOM officials by contradicting assurances that he had no intention of accepting Russian equipment. Second, the MiG deal bolstered Israeli and Congressional arguments that the LAF was not a responsible force committed to a long-term strategic partnership with the United States. Third, the United States was concerned that funds intended for U.S.-origin equipment like the M-60 tanks in Jordan would be diverted to fund an unnecessary and expensive MiG program. Finally, DAS Hale relayed Washington's displeasure at Murr's remarks on Russian television implying he had been driven to accept the offer of Russian assistance because "other countries" had offered too little, too late, interpreted as a swipe at the United States.

¶10. (C) Echoing a line heard in many of DAS Hale's other meetings with senior Lebanese officials, Siniora averred that he'd been unaware that MiGs were under discussion in Moscow. "There was talk of ammunition and possible tanks, but not MiGs." Noting that he and the cabinet (whose approval is required for the LAF to accept foreign military assistance) would "wait to see the details," Siniora commented that the announcement of the MiG offer had been good for LAF morale, good for the state, and made Hizballah and Syria very

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uncomfortable."

¶11. (C) Objecting to Israeli concerns, Siniora claimed that 10 planes were not a serious threat. "Nor would we use them against the Palestinian camps. The LAF's weapons aren't meant for confrontation. The value of such a stick lies in not having to use it." Siniora said he was comfortable that the cabinet and LAF leadership would make "the right decision" about the MiGs. "We don't want to antagonize our friends or play one against another, but it is important to demonstrate to the Lebanese people that the state is capable of defending itself."

COMMENT

¶12. (C) It was clear from his tone that, while he would say nothing to disparage Murr or the right of the LAF to seek whatever assistance it deemed necessary, Siniora shared our skepticism at the wisdom of the MiG deal. As head of the cabinet and penny-pinching former Minister of Finance, Siniora understands the long-term financial burden that maintaining the MiGs would place on the cash-strapped LAF. While working to squeeze electoral benefit from the deal for March 14 and capitalize on the boost in LAF morale, Siniora may well seek an excuse to turn down the offer when the time is right.

¶13. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this message.

SISON